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## Chapter 10

### Professional Identity

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#### Key ideas explored in this chapter are

- Professional identity
- Identity and career stages
- Professional culture
- Reflection

#### Introduction

All professionals develop a sense of themselves in relation to the work they do. Some will form a clearer sense of professional identity than others, and will consciously reflect on the values, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours which underpin their practice. Overall, this book argues the importance of each teacher articulating and justifying their own stance as an educator. Part of this process involves teachers considering who they are as professionals: in other words, involves them in shaping their professional identity. Conscious reflection on professional identity and how it informs practice can help teachers to understand how they respond to various professional situations, and to decide whether or not these responses are the most effective ones they could make. This chapter focuses on what professional identity is and how it is formed.

## **Exploring professional identity**

Professional identity has been described as the 'enduring constellation of attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences in terms of which people define themselves in a professional role' (Ibarra, in Dobrow and Higgins, 2005: 569). Current interpretations of professional identity do not see it as an entirely stable entity. Particular aspects of identity such as confidence in professional knowledge and skills can fluctuate depending on circumstances – what Colley et al. (2007) call a 'shuttling' between confidence and self-doubt. In addition, Watson points out that the 'relationship between professional identity and practice is not a simple unidirectional one in which some essential core of self... determines how we act in a given situation' (Watson, 2006:525). The situation is more complicated than this, but exploration and awareness of how professional identity shapes our practice can help teachers to respond more effectively and purposefully within what can be a challenging career.

Professional identity rests on personal identity. It is therefore based on individual values, beliefs, and feelings, as well as on professional knowledge and understanding. Broader social and cultural aspects such as ethnicity, culture and religion also play a part in how we define ourselves personally and professionally (Kostogriz and Peeler, 2007). In addition, research highlights the role emotions play in constructing and changing identity (O'Connor, 2008). All these aspects influence how we respond in professional situations but, while some of them are

givens, they are not immutable. We can develop aspects of ourselves to enable us to respond more effectively in professional situations. In order to develop these aspects we have to reflect on them and how they affect our professional practice.

Professional identity usually develops throughout a career (Flores and Day, 2005). Early career teachers may well have a different perception of themselves from those nearing retirement, and more experienced teachers may have an identity which is more stable than that of a beginning teacher. Of course, this need not necessarily be the case and we should guard against stereotyping. Beginning teachers can be resistant to reflective practice and developmental change while more experienced teachers can consistently review their practice, attitudes and beliefs.

In terms of career phase, shifts in identity are commonly seen as teachers move into posts of responsibility and begin to respond to changing expectations of how they are perceived in their new role (Reeves et al., 2005). There is potential here for mismatch between how others expect an individual to behave in a given role and how the individual might choose to behave based on their own professional beliefs. In thinking about professional identity it is important to consider the expectations of others and how those expectations affect individual practice.

### **The importance of professional identity**

Professional identity is important because it shapes how teachers interact with pupils and parents, with the wider community, and with other professionals. It can also influence teachers' responses to implementing education policy and school policy as well as shaping how teachers react to broader educational issues (such as inclusion or challenging behaviour). Exploring professional identity helps teachers to consider whether their responses are evidence-based, helpful to their pupils in terms of promoting learning, helpful in terms of collegiate working, and helpful to themselves in terms of developing their skills.

Some professionals have a strong sense of their professional identity and have thought specifically about what their professional role means to them. Others have an unclear sense of identity which can lead to anxiety in fulfilling a professional role, or to a less certain sense of career direction. There are internal and external factors to identity development, and these factors will be explored next.

### **Constructing professional identity: internal factors**

At the internal level, we construct identity partly through the stories we tell ourselves and others about our work (Søreide, 2006: 529). At this stage it is worth exploring how we construct identity in more detail through active reflection.

#### **Thinking Point 1 : exploring your professional identity**

Using the idea of stories or descriptions, how would you describe yourself as a teacher? You might like to think about this from different perspectives:

- How do you think of yourself as a teacher in your own mind?
- How do you describe yourself as a teacher to others?

- What aspects of your personal identity affect your teacher identity?
- What do your responses to these questions reveal about what you believe your professional identity to be?

### ***Narrative construction of identity***

By describing ourselves in certain ways, we align with professional norms and expectations. Within the profession, we might describe ourselves as taking a 'child-centred' approach to teaching. This description would stand less as a fully defined pedagogic position and more as a shorthand for focussing on children's learning (rather than being 'subject-centred' which risks being seen as functionalist and less caring about the human dimensions of teaching). How we describe ourselves may therefore partly be a response to expectations of the teacher role, whether these are public or professional.

Often we do not reflect explicitly on these stories and what they can tell us about our professional beliefs. But we can think of these narratives as revealing a core level of professional identity, and if we openly reflect on why we refer to our work in certain ways, this can help us to uncover our most basic assumptions about our practice and enable us to revisit what we see as our core professional values and purposes.

### ***Reappraising identity***

At times we may choose to, or be forced to, reconstruct or adapt our professional identity and this can prompt explicit reflection. In such situations we might have to apply effort to reshape our identities and this can feel uncomfortable as we reassess who we are as professionals. However, reflection need not imply extensive effort to radically alter our professional identity. It can mean an ongoing (but periodic) process where we develop as professionals by reconsidering our professional motivations, beliefs, assumptions and practices in order to think about what we need to do to respond to changing circumstances. If we see identity development as ongoing, and if we can make reflection habitual, then major change should feel less discomfoting in terms of making us question our professional role.

### **Constructing professional identity: external factors**

If the internal construction of identity can be thought of as providing a core, then external factors can be seen as adding further layers to identity development. Professionals respond to external demands in various ways, and the responses arise from how they view their role and how they believe they should react to these demands. They can resist or accept social, cultural and political expectations, but may do so without reflecting on why they choose certain courses of action. Thinking about the range of expectations placed on teachers gives an indication of how complex teaching is, and can also indicate the various aspects of identity which are shaped by these expectations.

### ***The teacher as subject expert***

Teachers are expected to show subject expertise. Demands relating to curriculum delivery and assessment are becoming more complex and rate of change can be rapid in response to changing policy influences. Frequent changes of policy direction can lead to a sense of uncertainty with respect to our professional identities in terms of what is being expected of us regarding curriculum expertise. This can be the case particularly where education policy attempts to shape practice openly (for example, *Curriculum for Excellence* in Scotland, or the 14–19 reforms in England).

### ***The teacher as expert on learning***

All teachers are expected to have pedagogic expertise. Earlier in this book we explored different facets of learning because teachers' understanding of how children learn effectively should rest on evidence gained from research and observation rather than on common sense ideas of 'what works' (see Chapter 6). This reorientation from models of transmission to emphasis on understanding how children learn has implications for teacher identity. Contemporary teachers have to think of their professional role as a broad entity, consisting of a range of knowledge, understanding and skills.

### ***The teacher as continuing learner***

Professional development is now expected to continue throughout a career but there is a need for greater understanding of the potential impact that this can

have on professional identity. CPD is increasingly seen as an indicator of a professional approach to work and is often a contractual obligation. There is a risk within this culture that professionalism is always under review and that professional practice is never regarded as being good enough. However, this view has to be balanced with the need for CPD as necessary to support and develop practice to enhance pupil learning. Identity becomes modified through professional learning and teachers can develop a greater sense of expertise by actively seeking to improve their professional abilities. An important source of continued learning can be found where schools act as learning communities for staff giving the opportunity to share professional learning (see Chapter 11).

### ***The teacher as publicly accountable***

The teaching profession exists because society has a need for it. There is a broad consensus among the main political parties in the United Kingdom about the purposes schools should have, and the role teachers should have in them. Teachers are held accountable for pupil learning at a political level within the devolved governments of the UK. In England, this agenda has led to teacher professionalism being defined much more in line with government policy and the outcome has been a move to a 'more managed teaching profession' (Furlong, 2008: 731). This can leave teachers in any sector feeling deskilled where policy implies that their role is as deliverers of the curriculum rather than creators of it (see Jones, 2008).

### ***The teacher as accountable to management***

Teachers must respond to the expectations of management in their schools, but they also have to respond to the overall management of the education system by local education authorities and through government policy. In responding to sources of accountability, professional identity is influenced by the extent to which each teacher feels they should have autonomy within their work. The more autonomy a professional feels they should have, the less they will respond positively to managerialism which tends to construct professionalism in terms of compliance and conformity and so tends to deny individual agency (Forde et al., 2006: 5). However, in some schools work is more collegiate than in others, fostering teacher leadership rather than a top-down approach (see Chapter 12).

### ***The teacher as accountable to clients***

Teachers are increasingly seen as accountable to pupils and parents for the educational service they give. This can lead to tension as teachers struggle to give the quality of service they want to because of various challenges (such as lack of resources, lack of time, or curriculum prescription). This tension may be compounded because teaching is often regarded as being 'of low status in the hierarchy of professions' (Colley et al., 2007: 186). Accountability tends to be framed in simplistic terms socially and politically because many do not understand the complexities inherent in teachers' work.

### **Thinking Point 2 : responding to wider expectations**

We have explored a range of expectations that can impact on teacher professional identity:

To what extent do you recognise these expectations as affecting your sense of professionalism and how you approach your work?

If these expectations seem less relevant to you, what are some of the expectations that can affect how you are perceived as a professional?  
Where do these expectations come from?

### **What does this mean in practice?**

Teacher identity has an important impact on a range of professional activities as well as on our sense of self-efficacy (the extent to which we feel we can perform tasks successfully). How we view our professional role will have an impact on how we:

- plan and develop the curriculum;
- relate to pupils, parents and wider communities;
- interact with managers and colleagues;
- interact with other professional groups;
- respond to systemic change;

- form communities of learning where approaches to practice are shared.

Through reflection on professional identity teachers mediate how effective their practice will be. The following sections of this chapter look at case studies which illustrate how identity potentially affects teaching practice. These case studies are fictional but have been developed to show specific challenges to identity which many teachers will recognise. After you have read each scenario, you might like to note down what you think are the main issues for each of the teachers with regard to their professional identity before you move on to read our thoughts on these issues.

**Case study 1: Kate**

Kate is a newly qualified teacher. She is being mentored by a more experienced teacher with whom she has weekly meetings and who also periodically observes her teaching. Initially Kate was apprehensive about being under scrutiny (as she saw it) but she has gradually appreciated how peer-review can help her develop as a teacher. Kate regularly interacts with colleagues who have a range of experience, and gains support from them. She has been involved in developing approaches to learning in her own classroom which she has been invited to share with her colleagues at a staff development day. She has brought back ideas from her CPD courses for newly qualified teachers which more experienced colleagues have

expressed interest in learning about. She has also been involved in policy-making in the school by being a member of a working group.

Kate's situation highlights some important aspects of how early career teachers develop their professional identity after leaving initial teacher education:

- Through mentoring during their induction into teaching.
- Through interaction with colleagues (with a range of experience).
- Through continuing professional development.

We will discuss these as they relate to Kate's developing teacher identity.

### ***Mentoring for beginning teachers***

Mentoring is increasingly seen as vital to teachers' early career development, and '[o]ne of the most important functions of mentoring is the cultivation of professional identity' (Dobrow and Higgins, 2005: 567). Reflection on practice is expected from the probationer within the mentoring process. At this early career stage we might expect professional identity to be fairly fluid and subject to shaping by outside influences (such as peer review and mentoring). Although peer observation and review have the potential to feel like scrutiny, mentoring should be supportive while inviting reflection on practice. While Kate shows signs that she has already developed a strong sense of herself as a professional, the

support she is receiving through mentoring is helping her to shape this identity further.

### ***Interacting with colleagues***

Identity development does not take place in isolation. It depends in part on being socialized into a profession, and this is a complex process 'by which a person acquires the knowledge, skills, and a sense of occupational identity that are characteristic of a member of that profession' (Adams et al., 2006: 57). Part of this early identity formation can be influenced by role models such as mentors or more experienced staff. Kate seems to have been encouraged to take part in collegiate activities in her school and has been viewed by experienced colleagues as a source of support for their own professional development. This in turn has impacted positively on Kate's sense of professional identity.

### ***Teacher as learner: the role of continuing professional development***

It is important for newly qualified and early career teachers to feel that they benefit professionally by undertaking CPD. Part of developing our professional identity consists of the extent we are open to new learning and to sharing practice. As teaching moves towards more collegiate forms of working, this aspect of professional identity and practice is becoming more important. There is also growing awareness of the CPD needs of early career teachers like Kate. This can be seen in responses to professional development needs such as local education authorities' programmes for NQTs and by the framing of early

professional development as a distinctive career phase by the TDA in England and by the general teaching councils in the UK. At this early stage in her career, it appears that Kate has an identity made up of different facets: learning professional, reflective practitioner, and team-worker. Overall she is able to see herself as someone whose knowledge and skills are valuable to the school community.

### **Case study 2: Eddie**

Eddie is an experienced classroom teacher of subject working in a secondary school. His school has been through recent changes which have forced him to reappraise his teacher identity. As a subject teacher he saw his main tasks as being teaching, assessment and curriculum development for his classes. However, the school has moved from departments to a faculty-based structure where several subjects have come together. Eddie found this difficult because as an experienced teacher he had been highly autonomous. He also felt the subject department staff got on well together and made a good team. At the same time, the school developed interdisciplinary programmes of study and so teachers began working in cross curricular groups. Again Eddie struggled with this new context but gradually saw how these new programmes reaffirmed his beliefs about the importance of learning opportunities for pupils. Eddie is now hoping to follow the portfolio route to demonstrate that he meets the standards required of a Chartered Teacher as set out by the GTC Wales.

Eddie's situation highlights the following aspects in identity development:

- Perceptions of self as a teacher: collegiate or individual?
- Identity and structural change.

### ***Perceptions of self: collegiate or individual?***

Eddie frames his role predominantly in individual terms, emphasising professional aspects for which he has particular responsibility. The core of Eddie's professional identity is that of classroom teacher, and this is a complex and dynamic role. His perception of himself as a teacher seems most strongly linked to an individual construct of professional identity, although his sense of unease at the loss of the subject department suggests that part of his identity is allied to a sense of his working relationships with colleagues. Professional identity does have collective aspects to it and can be affected by the culture and ethos of the departments or schools in which teachers work.

### ***Identity and structural change***

The move to a faculty structure impacts upon Eddie's professional identity in terms of his ability to feel autonomous as a subject teacher and his sense of belonging to a clearly defined professional group. Part of Eddie's task was to 'rethink' his role in the new faculty context. Losing a specific identity is one of the situations which could lead to Colley et al.'s *shuttling* (2007: 184): self-doubt can arise when the rationale for your identity is removed. Imposing change can lead teachers to feel that they have been disempowered and this can have a negative effect on professional identity. Without a sense of being valued, professionals can begin to doubt themselves and their place within the school system and this

may lead to a situation where professional identity becomes less robust. New roles can lead to uncertainty particularly where role change is forced. However, as Eddie's case study shows, we can adjust to those new roles and reflect on how our professional skills have developed, or can develop, within them. Despite narrowly defining his identity as a classroom teacher to begin with, Eddie's confidence in his skills are now such that he can consider how his skills match with those outlined in the *Chartered Teacher Standards* (GTCW, 2007).

### **Summary**

Professional identity is multifaceted and builds on our personal characteristics, beliefs and values, as well as on our professional learning, our interactions with others, and the nature of our professional role within the education system. Thinking consciously about who you are as a teacher can promote resilience in a stressful profession (see Forde et al., 2006: 40). Reflecting on your professional identity can help you to understand what you do well, and what you need to do to be more effective in specific areas of your work. Reflecting on professional identity can also help you to clarify your professional goals and how you can achieve these and can therefore have an impact on how you shape your career path.

Overall, reflection can help build self-efficacy: that is, the extent to which we believe we can achieve certain outcomes we think are desirable, and the extent to which we have confidence in our abilities based on evidence rather than on

supposition (Forde et al., 2006: 16). Exploring professional identity is important in terms of maintaining individual confidence and motivation within a professional world often characterized by rapid change, bureaucracy, complexity and uncertainty.

### **Key questions for discussion and reflection**

- In what ways could professional reflection support you to develop teaching and learning approaches for your pupils?
- How would your pupils and colleagues describe you as a teacher? Would you feel confident enough to ask them so that you can develop knowledge of whether or not the role you *think* you have aligns with the perceptions other people have of you?
- How would you describe the professional culture in the school you work in (or have your placement in)? To what extent does this culture enhance or limit your professional identity?

### **Further reading**

Bolton, G.E.J. (2005) *Reflective Practice: Writing and Professional Development* (Second edition). London: SAGE Publications Ltd.

This text provides an introduction to practical aspects of reflection. It includes an introduction to reflective practice which leads into discussion of various possibilities for exploring professionalism through writing.

Dillon, J. and Maguire, M. (Ed.) (2007) *Becoming a teacher: issues in secondary teaching* (Third Edition). Berkshire: Open University Press.

Chapters 1, 7, 8

Although aimed at teachers in secondary schools, the chosen chapters have wider appeal. Chapter 1 might be of interest to beginning teachers in its exploration of how student teachers develop their professional role.

Forde, C., McMahon, M., McPhee, A. and Patrick, F. (2006) *Professional Development, Reflection and Enquiry*. London, Paul Chapman Publishers.

Chapters 1–3

These chapters discuss key elements of professional identity for beginning and experienced teachers. They explore what it means to be a professional and what challenges and tensions arise in modern teaching.

Pollard, A. (2005) *Reflective Teaching*. London, Continuum. Chapter 5

Chapter 5 of Pollard's text (*Values and Identity: who are we?*) has useful reflective activities to help with exploration of the teacher's professional role.

Sachs, J. (2003) *The Activist Teaching Profession*. Buckingham, Open University Press. Chapters 2 and 3

In these chapters, Sachs looks at how teacher professionalism has changed in recent years and what some of the political dynamics around the professional role might be.

### **Web resources**

Teacher Development Agency (no date) *CPD in practice*.

[http://www.tda.gov.uk/teachers/continuingprofessionaldevelopment/cpd\\_in\\_practice/cpd/park\\_school.aspx?keywords=reflective+practice](http://www.tda.gov.uk/teachers/continuingprofessionaldevelopment/cpd_in_practice/cpd/park_school.aspx?keywords=reflective+practice)

Smith, C. (2008) *The use of Learning Journals as a self reflection tool to support and develop probationer teachers' skills in critical evaluation and reflection*. Edinburgh: GTCS

[http://www.gtcs.org.uk/Research\\_/TeacherResearcherProgramme/TeacherResearcherReports/use-of-learning-journals-critical-evaluation-reflection.aspx](http://www.gtcs.org.uk/Research_/TeacherResearcherProgramme/TeacherResearcherReports/use-of-learning-journals-critical-evaluation-reflection.aspx)

GTC Scotland Teacher Researcher Reports  
([http://www.gtcs.org.uk/Research\\_/TeacherResearcherProgramme/TeacherResearcherReports/teacher\\_researcher\\_reports\\_2.aspx?](http://www.gtcs.org.uk/Research_/TeacherResearcherProgramme/TeacherResearcherReports/teacher_researcher_reports_2.aspx?)).